

## Book review

### THE HEALTH OF NATIONS: TOWARDS A NEW POLITICAL ECONOMY

By Gavin Mooney

Zed Books, 2012; 162 pages; ISBN: 9781780320595

This book offers a highly readable introduction to the political economy of health, which covers some familiar territory – in terms of both theory and case studies – but which also introduces a personal angle and some fresh material. Given that preoccupation with technical and market-based solutions for social and structural problems is both widespread and persistent, Mooney presents a much needed analysis locating health inequalities firmly within the power dynamics of neoliberalism. This book will be appreciated by health practitioners, academics and students alike.

In some respects, however, the book does not entirely live up to its promise. While it clearly articulates the problem, its account of the dynamics of change could be more persuasive.

The argument of the book – the need for a new political economy – is laid out in four sections, which present the problem, provide illustrative case studies, propose solutions, and provide examples of societies which have succeeded to some degree in employing alternative paradigms and approaches. The book is logically structured, and its chapters are short and to the point.

Mooney begins by asking the question “Why are things so bad?” This first section covers the basics in terms of theory and provides a valuable introduction to both the political economy of health and the political economy of healthcare. I particularly appreciated the clear explanations of the meaning of the terms political economy (p. 15) and neoliberalism (p. 34) – these terms are often used in the literature but rarely well defined.

Some chapters in this section appear to have been written for an audience of (more traditional) economists. This is not surprising since it is the author’s discipline, however the lay reader may not find this focus so relevant.

The second section presents an eclectic mix of case studies of different issues from different countries, which Mooney uses to build his case. This was the most enjoyable part of the book for me. Written in a conversational style, many of these case studies draw on personal anecdotes from the author’s own experience. The highlight of this section – and perhaps of the book as a whole – is the chapter on neoliberalism and global warming. Here Mooney locates the problem firmly in the context of capitalism and neoliberalism and makes a compelling argument that economic

growth must be slowed or even reversed for climate change to be addressed.

The final two sections of the book are less satisfying. Mooney’s account of the solutions and the dynamics of change draw heavily on communitarianism – in Mooney’s view, community participation in decision making is the route through which power relationships can be reversed and neoliberalism ultimately overturned. I am not convinced.

Community participation in decision making about the allocation of resources is clearly important for a whole host of reasons and Mooney makes some important points here. However, it is his account of the dynamics through which changes in resource allocation can occur that is ultimately less than satisfying. Citizens’ juries, for example, are resource intensive and while they may work for making resource allocation decisions with respect to healthcare in Western countries, it is not clear that they can either be more widely applied or that they can tackle the roots of health inequalities – neoliberalism itself – or effect the redistribution of power at the global level.

Mooney argues that “... there needs to be radical change in the way we organise our lives, our economies and our societies” (p. 119). Yet his solutions are cast largely at the local level. The book does not present an analysis of the role of social movements in challenging the legitimacy of current regimes and the imbalance in the global distribution of power and resources.

The chapter on “The solutions in society more generally” does propose several changes that need to be made at the level of nation states and societies, such as addressing income inequalities by making taxation more progressive, and strengthening social institutions (including healthcare institutions). The examples of Kerala, Cuba and Venezuela are very instructive. But how do societies change to become more progressive in these ways? And what about reshaping the global economy itself? Although the book clearly identifies the problem as primarily located in the global political economy and its institutions, the solutions are not cast at this level.

Nevertheless, this book certainly provides food for thought for anyone with an interest in the political economy of health. It was clearly a pleasure for the author to write – his enjoyment of his subject material is very evident – making it, in many ways, also a pleasure to read. It should also stimulate some interesting debates.

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